DEPARTMENT OF APPLIED IT,
IT FACULTY

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN A COVID-19 CONTEXT

Exploring communicative displays of employee engagement among enforced remote workers

Olivia Pernefors and Sara Bjurenvall

Essay/Thesis:	*30 hp*
Programme:	*Master in Communication*
Level:	*Second Cycle*
Year:	*2021*
Supervisor:	*Davide Girardelli*
Examiner:	*XX*
Report no:	*2021:001*

Abstract

COVID-19 enforced remote work in a rapid and unplanned manner for a big part of the population, and the remote way of working is expected to continue beyond the pandemic. The extensive transition to working remotely has affected several aspects of organizational life and one of them concerns employee engagement which holds a dual promise of both organizational profitability and individual well-being. Research on employee engagement as a communicative behaviour suggests that employees communicate engagement both within, and outside the formal job role. However, literature regarding communicative displays of employee engagement has been limited and conducted within the frame of a physical office environment. The current study explores how employees communicatively display engagement during remote work due to COVID-19, both within and outside the formal job role. Fifteen semi-structured interviews with remote employees were conducted and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings showed that the ways in which the participants displayed engagement was based on attempts to compensate for lack of physical presence, and to maintain personal relationships with colleagues. By using social exchange theory this study points to employee engagement being a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that can be understood through rules of reciprocity, but also as a collectively held benefit.

Keywords

Employee engagement, social exchange theory, remote work, COVID-19, communication

Acknowledgements

Throughout the writing of this thesis, we have received a great deal of support and assistance. We would first like to thank our supervisor Davide Girardelli whose insightful feedback pushed us to sharpen our thinking and writing and brought the piece to the next level. We would also like to thank our professors and lecturers at the Department of Applied Information Technology for your efforts in operating the degree project course on distance. Then we would like to thank our partners, families, and friends for your support throughout these past months. We could not have completed this master thesis without your encouragement. Finally, we would like to say many thanks to each other for completing this thesis not only as colleagues, but as dear friends.

Table of Contents

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only been a crisis for health care systems around the world, but it has also caused social and economic instabilities, characterized by national lockdowns with strict restrictions of social distancing, school closures, demolished industries, and millions of lost jobs (Farrar, 2020; Wintermeyer, 2020). The International Labour Organization presents the number of lost full-time jobs to have reached 400 million globally in the second quarter of 2020 (International Labour Organization, 2020) which along with separation from family and dear ones, loss of freedom, and a feeling of helplessness has increased stress levels and anxiety among the population at large (Saladino et. al., 2020). The societal and economic changes brought by COVID-19 have also created challenges for organizations' everyday lives (Jones et al, 2021). For many organizations, the pandemic has meant being in the hands of governmental decisions as well as being more vulnerable to instabilities in national and global markets (McKibbin, 2020). Economic instabilities have forced organizations to deal with unintended layoffs while also ensuring continued organizational functioning, leading to a vast shift into working remotely (Bailey & Breslin, 2021).

The Swedish Government's strategy to fight the coronavirus heavily relied on organizations to restructure their operations to allow for remote work as a means to slow down infection rates (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020). The adjustment to remote work in Sweden is evidenced in the increase of remote working by 400% during the year 2020 (Tele2, 2020), and a third of the Swedish working population is currently performing their job tasks from home (SCB, 2020). According to an inquiry made by Sodexo (2020), Swedish employers and HR managers expect the remote way of working to continue also after the pandemic as many organizations see increases in efficiency and potential in a digital way of working (Sodexo, 2020). There are also indications that continued remote work to some degree is requested among employees (ST, 2020).

This extensive transition to working remotely is a unique event in organizational history, symbolizing a paradigm shift in how and when work is performed. The transition also creates new challenges and opportunities for organizations and their members to coexist. One well-known aspect that affects organizations when shifting to remote work, is the engagement among employees, namely whether individuals are enthusiastic about, committed to, and

involved in their work and workplace (Mann & Adkins, 2017; Gallup, 2021). In Sweden, HR managers have argued for remote work's effect on employee engagement to be one of the greatest challenges during the pandemic year (Sodexo, 2020). However, Gallup reports both the highest and lowest level of engagement rates among employees during 2020 (Harter, 2020). The shift to remote work due to COVID-19 thus seems to have had several implications on engagement among employees, indicating both challenges and opportunities.

In academia and practice, engaged employees are conceptualized as *employee engagement*, and have previously been proven to generate organizational success and a sense of fulfilment among individuals (Saks & Gruman, 2014). Employee engagement has been applied in several research fields, ranging from psychology to management and communication studies, and has been a useful tool in corporate life as a way to understand how employees make sense of their roles within the organization (Welch, 2011). An emerging approach within the field of employee engagement is research regarding how engagement is communicated between organizational members. Such studies have been conducted within the frame of a physical office environment, generating evidence of engagement displays as relying on being physically present (Schroeder & Modaff, 2018). However, employee engagement also exists among remote workers (Mann & Adkins, 2017; Harter, 2020) but how it is communicated by employees who work remotely, without access to physical presence, has not yet been explored in research.

Taking into consideration that COVID-19 has led to a notable increase in working remotely (Tele2, 2020; SCB, 2020) and that the remote way of work is expected to proceed after the pandemic (ST, 2020; Sodexo, 2020), knowledge about how employees display engagement in a remote work setting is of great relevance for future organizational life. With the many evidenced benefits of having engaged employees for both workers' well-being and the overall performance of the organization (Saks & Gruman, 2014), research that enables a deepened understanding of the subject can contribute with benefits ranging from the individual level to benefits on an organizational and societal scale. Insight on how employee engagement is communicated could bring guidance to managers in the challenge of creating engagement in a remote work setting (Sodexo, 2020). It could support management's decision-making by helping to detect engagement displays on distance, thereby supporting actions that enable employees to engage.

Drawing on Schroeder & Modaff's (2018) use of the theoretical framework of social exchange theory (SET) and the conceptualization of employee engagement, this thesis aims to provide knowledge on how employee engagement is displayed during remote work due to COVID-19. First, a review of relevant literature on employee engagement will be presented leading up to the positioning of this thesis and the research gap it aims to address. The research aim and the research question are then presented. The method section discusses the methodological choice of conducting semi-structured interviews for data collection, and thematic analysis to analyze the data. The findings section will then present themes and sub-themes of detected engagement displays found in the interviews. The discussion will relate the findings to the presented literature on employee engagement and to the theoretical framework of social exchange theory, implications for research and practice, as well as give suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

In the following section, literature on employee engagement will be presented by first giving an overview of the field in general, followed by a presentation of research on employee engagement as a communicative behavior. The theoretical framework of social exchange theory is then introduced, and finally, the context of COVID-19 and remote work is discussed, which positions this study in relation to existing relevant academic literature.

Employee engagement

Gallup (2021) defines employee engagement (EE) as individuals who are enthusiastic about, committed to, and involved in their work and workplace. During the past two decades, the concept of EE has become popular within both academia and among practitioners. According to Truss et al. (2013), this popularity of EE lies in its dual promise of improving organizational performance and individual well-being with the premise that highly engaged workforce does better at work, while also enjoying the work that they do. In addition, research suggests that organizations with engaged employees will benefit in productivity and profitability because the employees are committed to being a part of the organizational success, and thereby do their best each day (Welch, 2011; Robertson-Smith & Markwick, 2009). Saks & Gruman (2014) states that factors proven to positively affect levels of EE within an organization are "autonomy, feedback, development opportunities, positive workplace climate, recovery, rewards, recognition, and support" (p.168). If these factors are met to some degree, EE can serve as a means that employees can use to invest themselves in both the job role and in the organization as a whole (Robertson-Smith & Markwick, 2009; Saks & Gruman, 2014).

Literature on EE has pointed to the fact that engagement is easy to recognize in practice but difficult to define in theory and the wide use of EE is one reason for the difficulties in reaching a consensus on the definition (Schaufeli, 2014; Welch, 2011; Saks & Gruman, 2014). According to a systematic review on EE by Welch (2011), the three most prominent research areas where EE has been used are psychology (understood as having the psychological resources needed to invest the self in one's job role), business, and management (EE being a facilitator for business performance; leaders can affect and increase EE), and organizational behavior (viewing EE as a fulfilling, work-related state of mind,

identified by dedication and vigor). Welch (2011) also states that EE is relevant for the field of communication and argues that communication has the potential to enhance levels of EE within an organization.

Employee engagement as a communicative behavior

Communication research provided on EE has mainly been concerned with how internal communication can foster engagement (by e.g., promoting transparency between employees and managers), and how training in interpersonal communication can encourage engagement within organizations as a way to achieve business success (Mischra, 2014; Hynes, 2012). Schroder and Modaff (2018) take a slightly different approach by researching EE as a communicative behavior, exploring *how* employees communicatively display engagement to others in the organization. Schroder and Modaff's (2018) communicative approach to EE builds on Saks's (2006) use of social exchange theory (SET) to explain why employees engage in their work and organization to different degrees. Saks (2006) defines EE as: "a distinct and unique construct consisting of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components that are associated with individual role performance" (p. 602). Saks's (2006) understanding of EE is behavioral, meaning that engagement is not merely an attitude but behavior that employees perform. Schroeder and Modaff (2018) further argue that EE as a behavior is communicative in its nature and suggest that employees strive to display engagement to others in the organization.

Schroeder and Modaff (2018) explored EE as a communicative behavior by interviewing 15 employees from a U.S organization to establish how they display engagement. Findings showed that displays of EE can be understood in relation to two themes: *external expressions* (displays of engagement outside the formal job role, e.g. being a brand ambassador outside work, or joining activities after work hours) and *role defined displays* (displays of engagement related to the formal job role performance, e.g. doing more work than expected and leading by example). According to Saks (2006), EE only exists in relation to the job tasks and the organizational position which the formal job role includes for. Schroeder & Modaff (2018), on the contrary, found that EE is mainly shown in communicative behaviors that expand beyond the formal job role, behaviors that include making personal connections and taking part in social activities (i.e. the theme 'external expressions). Schroeder & Modaff's (2018) findings strengthened the theoretical

understanding of EE as a social exchange by identifying that employees display their engagement to return the appreciation received from their organizations, but also co-workers and supervisors.

Employee engagement through social exchange theory

Social exchange theory (SET) is widely accepted as a dominant concept to understand workplace behavior and is considered a powerful framework to analyze the relationship between employee and organization (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Saks' (2006) linking of EE and SET was crucial for understanding EE from a communicative lens, considering that SET offers an insightful perspective on workplace relationships and their effect on engagement. In detail, SET is an analytical framework that conceptualizes relationships as building on social exchanges, including a series of interactive behaviors with obligations (Zhu, 2012). These social exchanges build on certain rules that function as guidelines for the exchange process. A theoretical premise of SET is that, over time, the social exchanges between parties develop into relationships of trusting, loyal and mutual commitments - if the rules of exchange are abided by both parties (Blau, 2017; Emerson, 1976). A social exchange can be guided by different types of rules, where the rule of reciprocity or repayment is the most researched rule of exchange within organizational behavior and management research (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). However, there exist other rules that have been suggested to guide a social exchange, such as negotiation, rationality, altruism, group gain, status consistency, and competition (Meeker, 1971; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Zun, 2012).

Saks's (2006) use of SET for researching EE builds on the rule of reciprocity; the practice of exchanging something with others for mutual benefit. Social exchange relationships that abide by rules of reciprocity are characterized by interdependence between the parties, leading to an emphasis on the interpersonal transactions, i.e one party's behavior will lead to a suitable response from the other party (Zhu, 2012). In an organizational context, reciprocity has been understood as an employee receiving economic and socioemotional resources from their organizations, and thereby feels obliged to repay the organization (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). According to Saks (2006), EE is one means of repayment that employees can use to abide by the rules of reciprocity in relationships with their organization, and that the level of EE will vary depending on the resources employees receive from the organization.

Following this understanding, Schroeder and Modaff (2018) implies that employees seem to understand EE as an exchange that takes place between not only two, but several parties in a more complex exchange. Schroeder and Modaff (2018) thus suggest understanding exchanges of EE as a "four-way street - an intersection", rather than being understood as a dual relationship solely between employee and organization, as initially argued by Saks (2006). The intersection parable views social exchange as occurring between the employee, the organization, the supervisor, and the co-workers. Schroeder and Modaff (2018) findings indicate that engagement is multifaceted and involves more than the formal roles of individual organizational members.

Schroeder & Modaff's (2018) findings respond to critics regarding the relevance of SET in a modern workplace context which imply that SET does not acknowledge the complex relationships and the agile, changeable environment of the modern workplace. Such critics suggest that SET needs updates that allow for understanding complex relationships in the workplace that cannot merely be represented by simple dyadic reciprocity (Cropanzano et. al, 2017; Chernyak-Hai, & Rabenu, 2018; Cooper-Thomas & Morrison, 2018). To further explore EE as a multifaceted phenomenon, Schroeder and Modaff (2018) suggest that there is a need for additional knowledge of the communicative displays of EE by using SET, specifically about certain types of employees and in different organizational contexts. The extensive shift to remote work due to COVID-19 brings such a possibility to explore how EE is communicatively displayed in a new context.

Employee engagement in remote work during COVID-19

Cambridge Dictionary defines remote work as "the practice of an employee working at their home, or in some other place that is not an organization's usual place of business" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021). Regarding engagement, research on remote work has suggested that it can have a negative impact on employees' engagement by e.g. increasing feelings of social isolation and induce a sense of invisibility in the organization (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Orhan et al. (2016) more closely researched the effects virtual (i.e. remote) work has on workplace isolation and found that "when employees are physically separated from others, they sense that they lack the resources necessary for performing tasks, lose the shared social context, and feel socially isolated" (p. 119). Belle et al. (2015) further argue that the lack of workplace interaction that follows from remote work, can decrease employees'

sense of organizational belonging and thereby generate an inability to engage in the organization.

These negative effects of working remotely have, during 2020, been further intensified by social restrictions and lockdowns caused by COVID-19 (Waizenegger et al. 2020), and evidence points to a decrease in EE during COVID-19 (Ahmed et. al, 2020; Harter, 2020). However, there is also evidence of an increase in EE among some remote workers during the pandemic. Gallup reported that EE rates in 2020 "fluctuated more than ever before", and that the level of EE among U.S. workers reached a new high with 40% reporting to be "very engaged" in July 2020, compared to 33% in July 2019, indicating that remote work does not only bring negative effects on EE (Harter, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic thus contributes to a unique opportunity to research EE in the digital, remote workplace since it has enforced remote work on a big part of the population (Bailey & Breslin, 2021).

According to Lee et al. (2018) there is a lack of studies on EE from the perspective of the remote workers in general and argues that everyday situations have a major impact on remote workers' engagement. Examples of such situations include having access to tools allowing for communication in real-time, flexibility in scheduling, authority over decision making, and friendly relationships with colleagues. As Lee et al. (2018) focus on what impacts remote workers' engagement, there is still a research gap about how remote workers communicate their engagement. With the result presented in Schroeder & Modaff (2018), researching EE as a communicative behavior is proven to be relevant. Schroeder & Modaff (2018) namely highlight the importance of physical presence in engagement displays which is naturally excluded in a remote work environment.

Furthermore, remote work has mainly been understood as a benefit that organizations offer their employees that enables flexibility for workers. Correlation between flexible remote work and EE has been established in research where the importance of choice is underlined (Anderson & Kalliher, 2009). Remote work during COVID-19, however, grants no amount of free choice as it is enforced to lower infection rates. Waizenegger et al. (2020) thereby argue that working remotely during the pandemic calls for an updated understanding of what is previously known about remote work since the circumstances of COVID-19 made the transition to remote work happen rapidly and on a large scale. Waizenegger et al. (2020) also state that working remotely before COVID-19 used to be for the few and voluntary but is now for the many and enforced which affects the well-being of remote workers in new ways.

Purpose and research question

Previous research has underlined that EE holds a dual benefit for both individual well-being and organizational profitability (Truss et al., 2013; Saks & Gruman, 2014), and has indicated that a communicative lens is of value to gain a deepened understanding of EE in organizational life (Welch, 2011). However, the research on EE as a communicative behavior (in general) and research related to remote workers' communicative displays of EE (in particular) has been limited (Lee, et al. 2018; Schroeder & Modaff, 2018). The extensive shift to remote work due to COVID-19 thereby contributes to a contextual opportunity to explore how employees communicatively display engagement in a remote work setting (Waizenegger et al. 2020). Building on Schroeder and Modaff (2018), this study will contribute with insights on how EE is communicatively displayed by remote workers when the possibilities for physical displays are severely limited, and the intersection between employees, organization, supervisors, and co-workers instead is digital.

Applying the theoretical framework of social exchange theory and how it has been used by Schroeder & Modaff (2018) to employee engagement, the purpose of this study is to gain a deepened understanding of the communicative displays of EE during remote work due to COVID-19. This thesis aims to answer the following research questions;

RQ1: *How do employees communicatively display engagement during remote work due to COVID-19 through role defined displays?*

RQ2: *How do employees communicatively display engagement during remote work due to COVID-19 through external expressions?*

Method

Qualitative research method

This thesis is qualitative since it aims to understand a communicative phenomenon, rather than measuring and predicting one (Jablin & Putnam, 2001). The qualitative approach allows for collecting rich, detailed empirical data from a smaller sample size based on subjective experiences. The in-depth understanding of subjective matters that the qualitative method targets is in this thesis combined with a social constructivist perspective which views meaning to be created in social, communicative events. When taking a social constructivist approach to reality, collecting empirical data through interacting with individuals is validated as a way to attain knowledge (Bryman, 2016).

Semi-structured interviews

Interviews allow researchers to understand humans' lived experiences by gaining insight into their world. Interviews as a method generate descriptive data that qualitatively can be interpreted to explore the meaning(s) of the studied subject (Kvale, 2007). The interviews in this research are semi-structured, which Kvale (2007) defines as "[semi-structured interviews] seeks to obtain descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomenon" (p. 52). By using this method for data collection, respondents got to reflect and outline their own experiences of communicating engagement when working remotely which guaranteed that the researchers obtained subjective data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). This methodology highlights the social constructivist understanding of reality as accessed through social, subjective notions, and validates what is set up to be studied.

A challenge with conducting interviews according to Lindlof & Taylor (2019), is the time-consuming nature of the method as the need for flexibility to capture the lived experience requires patience and an open state of mind towards new inputs - the researcher can lose focus and track of time. For that reason, the semi-structured interview mode used in this study was carefully formed in line with a well-defined research question and interview guide, which allowed for a consistent focus on the research aim while still being open to reflections from the respondents.

Another important notion to have in mind throughout an interview study is reliability which concerns the “consistency and trustworthiness of the research findings, whether a finding is reproducible at other times and by other researchers" (Kvale, 2007, p. 123). As well as validity defined as “the degree that a method investigates what it is intended to investigate” (Kvale, 2007, p. 123). Throughout the process, the researchers have validated in terms of checking interpretations, question assumptions, and theorized findings. In terms of reliability, the main focus has been a continuous focus on inter reliability between the two researchers, especially in relation to interpreting and coding the empirical material.

To further contribute to the transparency and anticipate common critics regarding qualitative methods in general of being implicit, and thematic analysis in particular (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.95), the following section will comprehensively describe this study’s process of sampling, how the interviews were conducted, thematic analysis, and ethical considerations.

Sampling

The sampling of respondents has been conducted by following Robinson’s (2014) four-point approach to sampling in qualitative interview studies. Robinson’s (2014) approach has been used as a means to comprehensively discuss the sample of respondents, since being explicit with the choices made when selecting respondents has implications for the study’s transparency and trustworthiness. According to Robinson (2014), outlying the decisions related to sampling adds to the validity of the study, specifically to sensitivity to context, rigor, transparency, and coherence. In terms of sensitivity to context, a fully articulated and contextualized sample universe helps to prevent baseless generalizations by placing the study within a time, place, and meaningful group. To discuss the sampling choices also adds rigor to the study, in how the sample will be sufficient in supplying the information needed for a comprehensive analysis. Also, discussing all four points of the sampling process in explicit terms enhances the transparency of the study, and allows for coherence in that the sampling strategy is systematically fitted with the research aim, research method, and data analysis.

Sampling universe. The first step in the sampling process was related to the sampling universe, which is the totality of persons with legitimacy that can be sampled in an interview study. To make sure a sample of respondents is representative for a studied topic, Robinson (2014) suggests that inclusion and exclusion criterias’ should be defined to establish what

persons qualify to participate in the study. For this reason, the following inclusion criterias' for the sample universe was taken into consideration, individuals who; 1) worked remotely from home due to COVID-19 during a majority of the pandemic, 2) did not possess a supervisor/managerial position within their organizations (to maintain an employee perspective), and 3) worked in a Swedish-based organization, (to specify the geographic setting of the study).

Individuals who had been working remotely from home before COVID-19 were excluded from the sample, as it indicates that they worked remotely voluntarily. No inclusion or exclusion criteria were made regarding the type of organizations nor respondents' profession, in that manner, the sample was not limited to a specific organizational context. Because of the first inclusion criteria, the types of professions in the sample were of white-collar character, making the sample homogenous and specific in this regard. The sample was also homogenous in regards to age, as all respondents are part of the same generation, born between 1989 and 1995. However, the sample is argued to be representative of a working population, as this generation makes up the majority of the workforce in current writing (Delgado, 2020). For an overview of the respondents, see Table 1.

Table 1. *Overview of participating respondents*

Respondent	Age	Gender	Profession
R1	26	F	Human Resources
R2	26	F	Telecom support
R3	31	M	Recruitment
R4	26	F	Account Manager
R5	28	M	Art Director
R6	26	F	Software Developer
R7	27	M	Business Developer
R8	28	M	Software Developer
R9	32	F	Service Designer
R10	26	F	Administrative Officer
R11	29	F	Lawyer
R12	25	F	Software Developer
R13	30	F	Administrative Officer
R14	27	F	Accountant
R15	30	M	UX designer

Sample size. According to Robinson (2014), qualitative studies without a focus on theory development or generalizations will benefit from a sampling size of 3-16 participants. This size is considered to be enough for establishing a scope of cross-case generalities, while also preventing the researcher from being drowned in data. Further, smaller sample size is argued to be beneficial as it allows for "individual cases to have a locatable voice within the study, and for an intensive analysis of each case to be conducted." (Robinson, 2014, p. 39).

Following Robinson's (2014) guidelines regarding sampling size, a sample size of 15 respondents was set as appropriate, a number that also has been used and validated in previous interview studies on EE and SET (Schroeder & Modaff, 2018).

According to Guest et al. (2006), theoretical saturation is said to be the key to qualitative work and is defined as "the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data" (p. 59). For that reason, theoretical saturation has been taken into consideration when deciding on sampling size. Theoretical saturation is achieved when no new information or variations are discussed by the participants and thus indicates when the sample size is extensive enough to cover the studied subject. After talking to around 12 respondents the most prominent thoughts had emerged and no new dimensions were discussed, indicating that theoretical saturation was reached. This was assured when revisiting the data during analysis as it became clear that after talking to 12 respondents, the most essential patterns and themes had been established. Confirming that theoretical saturation was reached after interview nr. 12 which strengthened the validity of the findings.

Sampling strategy. The sampling strategy in this study has been of convenient nature. The convenience sampling strategy is described by Robinson (2014) as a strategy that sources possible participants based on accessibility for the researchers, among people that have a high willingness to participate. This type of sampling strategy was advantageous for recruiting participants in times of isolation and social distancing due to COVID-19. For qualitative research, issues with convenience sampling might appear if the sample universe is too broad without specific inclusion criteria, which could lead to unjustified generalizations (Robinson, 2014).

Since this study does not attempt to create abstract claims for a general population but consciously has made the inclusion criteria for the sample universe narrow in terms of context and demographics, the issues related to convenience sampling are taken into consideration. By having a convenience sample of 'enforced remote workers due to COVID-19, hired in Swedish organizations on non-supervisor/managerial positions', the sample is representative of the specific topic of the study and enhances the link between the specific sample and the sample universe. By having a narrow sample universe, potential generalization for the specific sample becomes as narrow. The choices made in regards to narrow inclusion criteria and awareness of the non-generalizability of the results thus make up for possible issues with this sampling strategy (Robinson, 2014).

Sample sourcing. Respondents were recruited by using the referral process of snowball sampling, defined by Robinson (2014) as "asking participants for recommendations of acquaintances who might qualify for participation, leading to 'referral chains'" (p. 37). Snowball sampling comes with a risk of ingroup bias since people tend to recommend and contact persons whom they have in their network and share similar worldviews with (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). However, none of the respondents work at the same organization, nor have the same educational or professional background. In regards to the aim of this study, the associated issues of snowball sampling were not considered to impact the results negatively.

A fundamental aspect when conducting ethical interview studies, highlighted by Robinsons (2014), is the importance of informed consent when recruiting participants. This is also underlined in the ethical codex by Vetenskapsrådet (2017). All participants entered this study on a free-will basis, after having received information about the aim of the study, its voluntary nature, and the ways in which their anonymity is protected. As this study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was also important to inform how the interviews were conducted safely according to the guidelines of health authorities. The recruitment message information possible participants received can be found in appendix 1.

All the participants in this thesis have taken part and agreed to a consent form that ensured their approval in participating. The consent form (see appendix 2) was developed with respect to instructions presented by the University of Cambridge on academic research involving personal data (University of Cambridge, 2021). As discussed in Robinson (2014), since interviews are conducted voluntarily, the risk of self-selection bias in the results is possible. When conducting ethical research this is unfortunately inevitable, but important to keep in mind as a possible bias in the findings.

Interview guide

The essential function of an interview guide is that the asked questions make it possible for the researcher to gain access to how the respondents perceive and experience their world and their lives (Bryman, 2016). Having a well-planned interview guide when performing semi-structured interviews helps the researcher to stay focused on the research aim, provides a structure for the interview, and at the same time gives room for flexibility. This study has followed general guidelines presented by Bryman when developing the

interview guide, which includes for 1) have a clear research focus, 2) structuring the questions under broader themes or categories, 3) a cautious formulation of the questions asked to make them easy to understand and match the "everyday language" of a layperson, 4) no use of leading questions or too specific questions, and 5) including background questions on demographics to validate that the participants match the sample (Bryman, 2016).

Questions were crafted based on theoretical implications from SET and EE and inspiration was taken from the interview guide of Schroeder & Modaff (2018), as Daniel Modaff kindly shared their interview guide with us. By crafting questions based on Schroeder & Modaff's (2018) interview guide, the validity of operationalization of the questions based on SET and EE is strengthened, as the two studies build on the same theoretical framework. Having based questions on Schroeder & Modaff's (2018) interview guide also adds to the reliability of this study in terms of replicability and provides the ability to make meaningful comparisons between the two studies. The interview guide can be found in appendix 4, both in a Swedish version and a translated English version.

To further refine the interview guide, a pilot study was conducted after having created the first draft. According to Kvale (2007), conducting a pilot interview is an important test of the interview guide in terms of the understandability of the questions and helps in discovering possible issues with operationalizing the theory. After the pilot interviews, the interview guide was revised and updated in accordance with lessons learned during the interviews. Some questions were too broad, and the structuring of the questions was not at all times optimal. The pilot interview gave important insight to heighten the quality of the interviews conducted for data collection.

Conducting the interviews

The interviews were conducted during a two-week period, from the 22nd of February to the 5th of March. The interviews took between 30-50 minutes and all were conducted via Zoom. Kvale (2007) highlights the importance of creating a comfortable interview setting at the beginning of the interview to generate qualitative and detailed answers from the participants. The researchers, therefore, focused on creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere in the initial stage of the interviews and aimed to be attentive, understanding, and respectful towards the answers given throughout the interview.

The two researchers divided the work and conducted eight versus seven interviews each. During the interviews and later during the transcription, the two researchers took notes in regard to impressions and initial thoughts of patterns in the respondents' answers, this with the purpose to be aware of self-bias, but also to triangulate the collected thoughts. Triangulation refers to the comparison between two or more forms of evidence about a single object of research (Morris, 2017). The purpose of triangulation in this stage was to reach convergence in regard to the initial understanding of the interviews between the two researchers and to add rigor and confidence for the thematic analysis.

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis have been used as a means to analyze the empirical data in this study, a method for systematically identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning in qualitative research. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step iterative process are the most used approach of thematic analysis and it allows for going beyond structuring and summarizing data. The six-step process enables high qualitative and conceptual data analysis by giving a systematic framework for researchers to establish themes through careful coding.

Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that flexibility is the main advantage of their approach to thematic analysis, as it's not tied to any specific theoretical framework, data collection method, sample size, or approach to meaning creation. However, taking theoretical decisions affects the process of identifying, analyzing, and interpreting the data and has therefore demanded a continuous reflexive process throughout the research. The following section will comprehensively describe this study's process of conducting the thematic analysis, in relation to the six-step process.

Step one: Data familiarization

As a first step, Braun & Clarke (2006) presents the recommendation of becoming familiar with the breadth and depth of the collected data through active re-reading of the content. It is recommended to read the entire data set at least once to get a grip of the overall message as well as its separate parts, this will allow for an initial understanding of what meanings, patterns, and possible codes that the data holds (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since this study has performed interviews, data familiarization was achieved through repeated listening

of the audio recordings while transcribing all 15 interviews, and later re-reading the transcribed material. The close reading and interpretive skills needed when transcribing lay the foundation for the rest of the analysis, in respect to this, the interviews have been transcribed manually in Google docs with a verbatim account for both verbal and non-verbal utterances. Each interview was imported to the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo.

Getting familiar with the data is crucial in an interpretive qualitative methodology, it was therefore important that the researchers collected and transcribed the interviews themselves, and that each interview was transcribed within 72 hours after taking place (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since the respondents are from Sweden, the interviews and the transcription were done in Swedish, however, important quotes and examples of coding have been translated to English for transparency and validity reasons. Examples of how translations were made can be found in appendix 5.

Step two: Generating initial codes

Coding is a way to organize the data into meaningful groups after becoming familiar with it. Codes represent "the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). In this study, data were coded with theory in mind, meaning that some questions based on the notions of EE and SET were asked and looked for. This meant identifying latent codes that might not have been explicitly expressed by the respondents. Some text segments were placed under several codes, keeping an open mind in regard to what suitable themes could be possible, as recommended by Braun & Clarke (2006). This step also included adopting a principle of intercoder reliability to ensure that the categorization and coding of the data was consistent between the two coders. This was done in line with what is suggested in O'Conner & Joffe (2020), namely that intercoder reliability includes combining dialogue with independent work between the coders, creating robustness in the findings.

Another recommendation that has been taken into account is that one should include enough text to capture the context when coding to avoid losing important nuances (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using Nvivo 2020 as a tool for coding helped in organizing the data into one or several codes without changing the original versions of the transcriptions. Table 2 exemplifies how codes were applied.

Table 2. *Examples of coding*

Illustrative quotes	Code
I mean since no one sees what I do it becomes very important for me that it still shows, and that engagement exists in both producing results but also like, keep a dialogue here and there to show 'I'm here, things happen and I deliver and, eh well, I'm here even though I might not be visible' kind of haha. - *R12*	Present or give updates on the progress
You want to contribute to the feeling that working from home isn't too boring. That you might call an extra time for small talk or trying to be positive regarding something… or… saying something that makes someone else happy. Only for the feeling of excitement. Not over the top. But it's such a big difference between being a bit bitter, neutral, or a little bit extra of "she was in a good mood today". Because you know that everyone has good and bad days when working from home. - *R4*	Expression of a positive mindset

Step three: Searching for themes

The identified codes were efficiently sorted by using Nvivo into broader themes that required greater analytical skills than in the first two steps. At first, the codes were divided into four overarching themes of communicative displays found in the material, and then sub-themes were actively searched for in line with theory and research questions. In this way, a cluster of main themes, sub-themes, and potential themes was established (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Step four: Reviewing themes

In this step, the themes were reviewed to see which of them either could be divided into separate ones, merged, or kept as they were. Braun & Clarke (2006) suggest considering internal homogeneity (data within a theme should target the same issue) and external

heterogeneity (the themes should present different nuances of the data), stated by Braun & Clarke (2006) as: “data within themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes” (p. 91). This step involves re-visiting the themes as separate units to ensure that the codes within them are coherent, and when that is done, one should move up one level to ensure that the themes are coherent with each other and with the theory used.

In moving back and forth between these two levels to refine the material, a thematic map was generated which provided a validated overview of the final themes. By considering internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity and through reviewing the themes, the researchers found that the communicative displays could be better understood by presenting them with the remote work situation of COVID-19 and separating them by ‘role defined displays’ and ‘external expressions’. Thereby amplifying the research question in the results.

Step five: Defining and naming the themes

When reaching step five, the work of establishing the “essence” of what each theme is, the aspects it captures, and how they all relate to one and other, is presented to be able to pinpoint what is interesting and why. It can be explained as telling the story of the themes and how they fit into the broader story of both theory and the societal context in which the study operates.

Step six: Producing the report

In the final step, data is presented in a capturing and clarifying way that all the previous steps have been leading up to, convincing the reader of the study’s relevance and validity. A sensitivity to presenting complexities of the analysis in this study has been consciously considered to present the findings as extensive as possible while using a clear and accessible language. Quotes have been included when presenting the analysis to strengthen the reliability, and also to illustrate the findings in a more vivid way (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations and reflections have been fundamental aspects throughout the research. This study has been carefully performed in regard to the ethical guidelines presented by the Social Research Association (SRA) to ensure that general ethical measurements have been met throughout the process. It is stated by SRA that "...social researchers must conduct their work responsibly and in light of the moral and legal order of the society in which they practice" if social research is to remain beneficial for the society and individuals it concerns (SRA, 2003). According to Bryman (2016), the fundamental ethical guidelines for social science to take into consideration concerns integrity, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation, where this study has been performed in regard to the Ethical Codex from Vetenskaprådet (2017) to ensure these fundamental aspects.

Kvale (2007) also states that when conducting interviews, the aspect of how the study sets out to improve the "human condition" of the participants is crucial. In researching certain experiences of remote work during COVID-19, and what ways of communicating engagement that employees have adopted during this particular time, the hope is that this study can contribute with valuable insights for future work life and the challenges it might bring in regard to remote work in organizations. Since EE has been shown to be beneficial for both organizations and individuals (Truss et al., 2013), the results of this study have relevance on both of those levels but also on a societal level in that it gives implications for how we, as a society, better can understand the new remote workplace.

Findings

Two main themes were established from the collected data, namely, *Role defined displays for compensation* and *External expressions for maintenance.* Each theme contains three sub-themes that address the most prominent dimensions of how employees communicatively display engagement during remote work due to COVID-19.

Table 3. *Summary of the two main themes and correlating sub-themes.*

Main themes	Role defined displays for compensation	External expressions for maintenance
Sub-themes	Showcasing productivity	Joining social digital activities
	Proving presence using technology	Initiating social interactions
	Taking an active role in digital meetings	Expressing a positive mindset

Role defined displays for compensation

The first main theme is concerned with role defined displays (displays related to the formal job role). Findings in this study show that role defined displays were the most common engagement display when working remotely. Respondents argued that displaying engagement in relation to the formal job role gained importance due to a lack of physical interaction with others in the organization. One respondent explained it as: “no one sees what I do, so it’s extremely important for me to show that my engagement still exists by constantly delivering results.” (R12). The aspect of not being physically present at the office generated a feeling of limited possibilities of how to show engagement, for example not being able to walk around the office building or: “touch base at a colleague's desk” (R3). Since working remotely forced the respondents to reconsider their established ways of communicating engagement, they tried to find new strategies for replacement which R12 expresses as: “It’s harder to show engagement now, in a way. I have lost the part I just described, walking around and being in the organization. I’ve felt like, how can I show engagement instead?” (R12). Before remote work, it seems as R12 experienced that social exchanges of engagement could take place by

physically seeing each other doing work tasks at the office. Engagement as a form of repayment occurring in such social exchanges thus needed to be reconsidered when shifting into remote work.

Furthermore, working remotely often came with a feeling of invisibility when previous ways of showing engagement no longer were feasible. R15 describes the feeling of being invisible when not physically showing up to work every day and communicating engagement:

> In the office, you can just walk by and have the feeling that, just because I said hi to that person, I've filled the tank or charged that battery, but at home, it feels like you disappear, and those things fizzle out, and then you might want to show engagement in other ways. (R15)

R15 continues discussing the feeling of being invisible, and describes that the context of COVID-19 has contributed to a fear of not being able to show enough engagement since there has been an increased risk of losing one's job: "I don't know.. but yes, I think the invisibility generates a fear, and well the situation, the pandemic, creates an even bigger fear of losing one's job." (R15)

Fear and anxiety stemming from the feeling of invisibility were common themes in the interviews, and the lens of SET highlights that invisibility also relates to uncertainties of whether one had successfully repaid the organization or supervisor with engagement when working remotely. The feeling of invisibility thus heightened uncertainties regarding social exchanges since respondents did not experience that their part of the social exchange (i.e. their engagement) to be as prominent during remote work.

In the following sections, subthemes of how the respondents tried to compensate for the lack of physical presence through communicative displays of engagement will be presented, namely *showcasing productivity*, *proving presence using technology*, and *taking an active role in digital meetings.*

Showcasing productivity

This sub-theme addresses the respondents' concern of displaying productiveness in completing the job tasks at hand, as a way to communicate engagement. Before COVID-19, simply being at the office, saying hi and talking to people, and physically being present

indicated engagement since it was a sign of: “checking in for the day” (R10). As expressed by R14, the need to present achievements (such as writing reports, or closing cases) has increased when the space for socializing decreased:

> I’m a happy and forward person and show that with body language, I think it’s fun to meet people, fun to talk to people. But, we document all our work, so it becomes more about achievements in a way now. Because before [the COVID-19 pandemic] it was more, maybe a mix of being social and good with customers, while also being good at doing the job. (R14)

Another example of social interactions that used to be a part of the workday, that now has been substituted with mainly showing productiveness, can be found in the quote by R11: “At the office, you’d be like ‘today it’s Friday, we have a Friday fika, a team lunch and then a meeting’. Now when I’m home... it’s only work that counts.”(R11) In addition, presenting what has been produced in a day or week became extra important when working from home, as the feeling of not being visible intrudes a feeling that it is up to oneself to stay focused at work, and to communicate that engagement to supervisors. Otherwise, there is a risk of being mistaken as less engaged by supervisors when working remotely, which R12 expresses as:

> It is very important that my boss sees what I do… because it’s so easy to take advantage of this situation and ‘chill at home’, and it’s so important for me to know that he knows that I don’t. And that’s why it’s important, in the ways I still can communicate it, that I work 110 percent. (R12)

Examples given of how respondents showcased productivity were related to their specific job role, and since the respondents all had different professions, the specific engagement displays of showcasing productivity were diverse. Examples of productivity according to the respondents were: “to close several cases” (R14) “report overtime” (R13), “plan more to check off tasks” (R1), “report how many meetings I’ve had” (R5), or “schedule customer meetings in the common [organizational] calendar” (R3). From a SET perspective, the enhanced focus on presenting outputs shows how respondents aimed to prove their value for the organization which points to a logic of reciprocity. By following the rules of reciprocity respondents hoped to sustain relationships with supervisors, with

the belief that payments given now (through showcasing productivity) will be reciprocated in the future (e.g. continued employment).

Proving presence using technology

Another way to communicate engagement to compensate for the lack of physical presence was using technology to signal and prove availability or presence. An example of how technology could be used to prove presence was making sure that the status marker in Teams stayed green, which indicated being active and present by the computer: ”You know if someone is working or not depending on whether the symbol in Teams is green or yellow. That’s why I try to stay green all the time.” (R6) The quote by R6 addresses the feeling of not being (physically) visible, and how technology is used to compensate for that by proving presence through the green symbol indicating that one is online and reachable.

Having the video camera turned on during digital meetings was the most common use of technology to mark presence. Turning on the camera was mentioned by all respondents as a way for them to show engagement, and vice versa: “I think the level of engagement is determined by the act of either having the camera turned on or not because then customers will notice if you’re there listening, or if you’re just staring at the screen.”(R7). Another respondent said: “If you’re just sitting on your chair, quiet and without having the camera on, then the engagement is probably not there.”(R8). Or as R10 puts it: “some people log in at the last minute, don’t use camera, don’t use mic. You don’t know if the person is even there.”(R10)

However, turning on the camera as a communicative display of engagement was strongly impacted by the level of engagement among others in the meeting, which suggests that the use of a camera is affected by reciprocal elements of EE (i.e what is given is received). Several respondents stated that they often turned off their cameras if their colleagues did so since it indicated disengagement from the colleagues’ behalf. On the contrary, respondents turned on their cameras to show appreciation to colleagues who were perceived to display engagement in meetings. This is exemplified in a statement made by R8:

> Having the camera turned on can mean a lot for the one who’s talking. Having a conversation to a black screen and seeing like… avatars, rather than ten people who

have their camera turned on. So that's one way that I try to show that I'm watching and that I'm in the meeting. (R8)

Turning on or off the camera is thus used as a means to repay the level of engagement given by others in the organization.

Taking an active role in digital meetings

Taking an active role in digital meetings was another way respondents argued to display engagement. Several respondents mentioned that previous ways of showing engagement in physical meetings were done through the use of non-verbal communication, such as using body language and having eye contact with the speaker. In a remote setting, respondents realized that these displays were insufficient, and their strategy had to change from non-verbal displays to verbal displays such as "being active in discussions" (R14), "giving feedback" (R2), or "try to ask questions" (R7). The importance of verbal expressions during remote work is expressed by R9:

> There are certain limitations in doing everything online. Even though you have video meetings, the set-up is different and therefore you need new ways. You realize that, alright, now I have to make myself heard for others to realize that I'm actively participating and are part of the discussions. In ordinary circumstances, it would have been enough for me to just be physically present, and look at the people participating. Now, verbal communication is much more important. (R9)

Displaying engagement through taking an active role in digital meetings was thus mainly exemplified by verbal contributions. However, respondents did argue for non-verbal expressions to still be of some importance due to difficulties with speaking simultaneously in digital meetings: "When you're like 40 people in a Zoom meeting, it's impossible to join in on a conversation" (R11), "It's usually two-three people who speak, even if we're 20 participants" (R14). Non-verbal expressions such as doing a thumbs up or: "smiling, nodding and showing that you are there" (R6), was still argued to play a part in indicating if a participant was engaged or not, but not to the same extent as verbal contributions.

The above-mentioned challenge of being verbally active in digital meetings made the respondents perceive the mere effort of trying to make oneself heard to be a way of communicating engagement. R3 argues that taking an active role through verbal expressions and making oneself heard (e.g. in discussions) is showing engagement since it has become easier to take a step back when working remotely: “I show engagement by being active! It’s incredibly easy in digital forums to take a step back. Like we haven’t had a clear meeting agenda, so if you want to say something you can, but you don’t have to.” (R3). This was also argued by R9, who explained the attempt to show engagement as being active in discussions and coming up with new ideas: “Participate in discussions and conversations, seeing the whole picture: what can we do to move forward? To have a positive approach and see opportunities, and be engaged in discussions, wanting to take things forward.” (R9). The quote by R9 points to being active as taking the lead in conversations and making oneself noticed by speaking up. In terms of SET, the engagement display of taking an active role in digital meetings (in contrast to being passive) also demonstrates the respondents’ need to feel like they repay the organization with EE even when working remotely.

Summarizing the first theme

The first main theme, *role defined displays for compensation,* addresses the fear and anxiety of being invisible that respondents felt when working remotely. Respondents seem to interpret the lack of physical presence to risk to not properly repay the organization with engagement. The three presented sub-themes demonstrate the respondents’ strategies to compensate for such lack by adjusting the ways in how to communicatively display EE during remote work to repay their organization. A summary of the first main theme can be found in table 4.

Table 4. *Role defined displays for compensation*

Sub-themes	Engagement displays	Examples	Illustrative quotes
	Showcasing productivity	Increased focus on output, enhanced reporting of job-related achievements	"At the office, you'd be like 'today it's Friday, we have a Friday fika, a team lunch and then a meeting'. Now when I'm home... it's only work that counts." (R11)
	Proving presence using technology	Use of video camera, the status marker of being online (eg. in Teams)	"I think the level of engagement is determined by the act of either having the camera turned on or not because then customers will notice if you're there listening, or if you're just staring at the screen."(R7)
	Taking an active role in meetings	Asking questions, contributing with suggestions or ideas	"Participate in discussions and conversations, seeing the whole picture: what can we do to move forward? To have a positive approach and see opportunities, and be engaged in discussions, wanting to take things forward." (R9)

External expressions for maintenance

The second main theme is related to external expressions (displays outside the formal job role) of EE. In previous research, examples of external expressions addressed engagement displays in physical environments, such as attending physical events, creating personal connections with co-workers, or joining activities after work hours (Schroeder & Modaff, 2018). Findings from this study indicate that similar external expressions of engagement occur, but because of the COVID-19 context (i.e. including social restrictions and enforced remote work), they have been transformed into remote versions (e.g. digital activities after

work hours). When comparing showing engagement through external expressions in a physical office to showing engagement through external expressions in a remote work setting, the respondents in this study argued that it was more challenging. Many respondents mentioned that they had issues related to their motivation of showing external expressions of engagement, as they had difficulties experiencing other organizational members' engagement. R15 stated that it was "harder to recognize the collective engagement" when working remotely, which affected the individual engagement level.

The challenge related to the motivation of displaying external expressions of engagement can be explained by the detection of respondents' understanding of external engagement as a collective effort among organizational members, built on informal agreements of giving and receiving. The respondents seemed to understand engagement as existing in a shared 'pot', to which engagement is given and received. Remote work was argued to have complicated the access to the collective engagement 'pot' since the respondents experienced it to be "very hard to feel engagement from colleagues" (R6) which complicated the social exchange: "Before covid, engagement was created between the colleagues I work with. We created engagement in the things we did together. Now it feels like I'm on my own in everything I do." (R1). A comparison of engagement as a collective effort before and during remote work can also be found in the quote by R12: "You don't experience colleagues' engagement in the same way now, it's inspiring to hear others' speak with engagement, you learn and work together which creates a collective drive and joy. That part is lost now." (R12). The issues with recognizing a collective engagement resulted in challenges with the motivation to display engagement, as the fundament of the social exchange had disappeared; respondents experienced that they gave engagement but that they did not receive in return.

Despite issues related to motivation, the respondents still made efforts to display engagement outside their formal job role through the remote work versions of external expressions. The respondents argued that engagement displays outside their formal job role in these new circumstances were intended to maintain everything "the way it used to be" (R3), both in regard to interpersonal relationships, and to maintain the organizational culture. As one respondent explained it:

> Everyone still fights for us to be a community and do stuff together, and people have expressed concerns about the newly recruited and that no one really gets to

know them… How will things be when we come back to the office, will they feel engaged and included? But we still do activities together and have meetings just for fun. (R4)

The reason for communicating engagement beyond the formal job role seems to be done with the intent to make sure the personal relationships established in a physical environment were intact and maintained until allowed back to the office. The fact that respondents made efforts of giving engagement despite experiences of fewer returns, underlines the long-term relational aspect of social exchanges. The sub-themes describe the most common ways of how this was done, namely *joining digital activities outside work hours*, *initiating social interactions*, and *expressing a positive mindset*.

Joining social digital activities

A majority of the respondents argued that one way for them to communicate engagement was by participating in social activities not related to work tasks and beyond the requirements of their formal job role, such as digital fikas or digital after-works. Respondents expressed that their participation in the social digital activities was a way to display engagement: "To show engagement is to not disappear in one's bubble when working on distance. But still be alert and join those digital after work's, fikas and everything" (R15).

One main motivation of showing engagement by joining social digital activities was to uphold the old ways of social interaction but in a digital environment. Respondents thought it was important to continue the former ways of interaction to preserve relationships with the colleagues, as argued by R2:

I'm joining these social activities to… show engagement! To show that…this situation is special, so let's do this together, so we not only have work-related discussions but actually talk about something else too. Because after-works and fikas and such stuff, that's what we used to do as colleagues. (R2)

Despite that respondents showed up to digital social activities with the motivation to keep interacting, several respondents argued that the digital activities only were "wholehearted attempts" (R4) from the organization to enable social interaction. However, the respondents argued that digital activities could not compare to physical ones because they

were often perceived as “quite cringy” (R3) or even “lonely” (R15). Nonetheless, the respondents still showed up during their free time, to show their engagement to the organization. Before remote work, respondents argued that participating in social activities both communicated engagement to the organization and “gave something in return” (R13) to them personally in terms of energy or amusement. Now, the reason to participate was mainly a way to display engagement for others’ sake, and to contribute to the collective engagement ‘pot’. For instance, R15 understood the engagement behavior of ‘being there’ as a collective effort among all organizational members:

> Digital after work functions like a reminder that everyone experiences the same things, everyone's at home, and everyone has joined this digital after work just like me. You want to show yourself, chat a little bit. Everyone is not social, but everyone does their best. And I want to be part of that. (R15)

The logic of social exchange is thus shown in the quote by R15, that one can be a part of a social, collective engagement effort if one decides to give something that contributes to its existence, i.e. joining in on digital social activities. However, the respondents joined digital activities without the expectation of receiving engagement from others in return. The implication is that the experience of the social exchange of EE is different in a remote setting since the respondents could not ‘access’ other colleagues' engagement.

Initiating social interactions

Another sub-theme of external expression was attempts to initiate a social interaction. In comparison with the former sub-theme *joining social digital activities,* this sub-theme points to taking action or initiating a social interaction rather than ‘just’ participating in one. Respondents gave different examples of how they took social initiatives, both on an interpersonal and organizational level. For interpersonal relationships, “initiating a chat group” (R3) or calling a co-worker to check in, was understood as an engagement display that facilitated the maintenance of relationships with colleagues: “I have a colleague who’s been working from home every day since March, and she’s definitely not feeling well. Many colleagues are loyal in calling her once a day, including me, and use video to interact with her, making her involved.” (R10).

Another type of social initiative understood as an engagement display was to proactively organize social digital events for the whole organization instead of reaching out to one specific colleague. In the quote by R5, engagement is expressed in the act of arranging a wine tasting for all other colleagues to join, with the purpose to socialize outside work and to maintain the organizational culture:

> We've ordered small glass bottles in which we'll pour eight different wines, and pack them as a little kit, together with arugula, lemon, parmesan cheese, and crisps. All employees will then, at a scheduled time, come and collect their kit and go home. Then my colleague and I will proceed with the wine tasting digitally. (R5)

The reason that taking initiatives that enabled socialization between colleagues was interpreted as a way to show one's engagement was because of the remote working situation. Working remotely was expressed by respondents as creating "an incredibly raised threshold in maintaining social relations" (R5), and efforts of trying to maintain these relationships through social initiatives were therefore interpreted as engagement.

Expressing a positive mindset

Another theme of external expressions was the respondents' attempts to stay positive and express positivity to others. Because of the contextual situation of COVID-19, the respondents noticed increased negativity among other organizational members expressed through complaints about having to work remotely, the supervisor, or the social isolation restricting their everyday life: "I've noticed increased negativity among one of my colleagues… Every conversation starts in a bitter tone. She's become bitter on the work tasks, on the supervisor, on the situation. She is disengaged in everything." (R1). The negativity from the colleague was interpreted as disengagement by R1, as evidenced in the quote. The respondents argued that because of all the issues COVID-19 and the remote work brought to the organization, making the effort to keep a positive outlook or contribute with joyful energy was perceived as an engagement display. R4 discusses being positive as doing small things to make others happy:

> I want to contribute to remote work not being too boring. I might call an extra time to chit chat, or try to be positive regarding something… Or to say something that

> makes the other happy. Just to create a feeling of excitement. Not over the top. But it's such a big difference between being bitter, neutral, or a tiny bit positive, and giving the impression of being in a good mood. Because you know that everyone has bad days when working from home. (R4)

Expressing a positive mindset through verbal expressions included "commenting on others [video] backgrounds" (R11), sending "emoji reactions when something is funny or well said" (R7), or writing positive comments in emails as the quote by R13 exemplifies: "I try to spread joy in the little ways possible among the colleagues, that you try to uplift one another, like writing something nice if you're sending an email to someone." (R13). Expressing a positive mindset could also be done through non-verbal expressions such as having a cheerful tonality in one's voice (i.e. sounding happy when speaking), as described by R1:

> I still have to do my job well, despite it not being so much fun right now, but I cannot let that show to the one I'm working with. I still think you're obligated to contribute in the same ways as before and keep a positive tone [in speaking voice]. Engagement towards others is the most important one. (R1)

This sub-theme thus demonstrates the perceived importance of giving to others and caring for others' happiness in communicating engagement when working remotely. A form of reciprocity also appears in that the respondents hoped to get the same positivity in return to maintain relationships that used to exist at the physical office.

Summarizing the second theme

The second main theme, *external expressions for maintenance,* addresses the challenge of displaying external expressions of engagement in a remote work setting. Respondents argued for a raised threshold to experiencing other organizational members' engagement through digital substitutes. Findings point to that the respondents lacked access to a collective engagement 'pot' among the colleagues, leading to the experience of receiving less return on engagement efforts. The respondents still communicated engagement through external expressions with the intent to maintain personal relationships among organizational

members that had been established in a physical office. The three presented sub-themes demonstrate the respondents' strategies to communicate external expressions of EE during remote work. A summary of the second main theme can be found in table 5.

Table 5. *External expressions for maintenance*

Sub-themes	Engagement displays	Example	Illustrative quotes
	Joining social digital activities	Participating in digital after work, participating in digital fikas	"I'm joining these social activities to… show engagement! To show that…this situation is special, so let's do this together, so we not only have work-related discussions but actually talk about something else too. Because after-works and fikas and such stuff, that's what we used to do as colleagues." (R2)
	Initiating social contacts	Calling a colleague, starting a chat group, organizing digital events	"We've ordered small glass bottles in which we'll pour eight different wines, and pack them as a little kit, together with arugula, lemon, parmesan cheese, and crisps. All employees will then, at a scheduled time, come and collect their kit and go home. Then me and my colleague will proceed with the wine tasting digitally." (R5)
	Expressing a positive mindset	End emails on a positive note, giving the impression of being in a good mood, have a happy tone in speaking voice	"I try to spread joy in the little ways possible among the colleagues, that you try to uplift one another, like writing something nice if you're sending an email to someone." (R13)

Discussion

In regards to RQ1 on how employees communicate engagement through role defined displays when working remotely due to COVID-19, this study hints at both similarities and differences with previous research done. In accordance with Schroeder & Modaff (2018), findings in our study suggest that respondents perceived their work-related outputs to show that they were an engaged employee to others in the organization. An understanding which also responds to what previous research on EE in general has stated, namely, that engaged employees strive to do their best each day and commit to being a part of organizational success (Welch, 2011; Robertson-Smith & Markwick, 2009). Our findings specifically suggest that: (1) there is a perceived gain in importance of role defined displays among the respondents which stem from (2) uncertainty related to rules of reciprocity, and (3) the context of COVID-19.

Respondents in our study perceived that the new, remote work setting created a need to compensate for the lack of physical presence, which led to a greater focus on displaying engagement in relation to the formal job role to ensure continued commitment to the organization as represented in our three sub-themes (Table 4). This contrasts Schroeder & Modaff (2018) that instead found role defined displays to be less prolific among employees working in a physical office. Our findings suggest that there is a perceived gain in importance of role defined displays that can be linked to the intrusive feeling of being invisible when working remotely. The findings of feeling invisible as a remote worker goes in line with previous research on the field on how remote work affect employees (Belle et al., 2015; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007) and according to the respondents in this study, the feeling of invisibility generated a fear of not properly communicating engagement.

The fear related to invisibility can from the perspective of SET be understood as a fear of not having repaid the organization as one would have before working remotely. This seemed to generate uncertainty among the respondents concerning the rules of reciprocity, specifically about transgressing their part in the mutual agreement of repayment with the organization and/or supervisors. The uncertainty related to rules of reciprocity seems to depend on that, before remote work, social exchanges of EE took place in daily practices in a physical office (e.g. seeing each other, asking spontaneous questions), which enabled employees to maintain a reciprocal balance. Remote work instead made the employees feel uncertain if they had truly done their part in the mutual agreement, hence the need for

compensating their lack of physical presence through *showcasing productivity, proving presence using technology,* and *taking an active role in digital meetings* as ways to display engagement.

In SET, abiding by the rules of reciprocity is understood as a fundamental part of building and maintaining a committed and trusting relationship (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Zhu, 2012). Thus, from an employee perspective, transgressing the repayment expectation by insufficient displays of engagement could jeopardize the relationship with the employer, generating a possible loss of socioeconomic resources such as receiving rewards, recognition, and support (Saks & Gruman, 2014). The employees' perception of communicating engagement through role defined displays as having gained importance can, through the lens of SET, be understood as employees wanting to ensure a continued, trusting relationship with their employer.

The context of COVID-19 can enable further understanding of the respondents' fear of insufficient organizational repayment since the increased anxiety related to economic uncertainties brought by the pandemic also have increased the risk of losing one's job (Waizenegger, 2020; Saladino et. al., 2020). The need to repay the organization as an employee seems related to that employment (seen as a resource given to employees from employers) gained added value during COVID-19. In this manner, our findings suggest that during the pandemic the respondents experienced a heightened value in communicating engagement through role defined displays to ensure repayment in relation to their employment.

A possible impact on the discussed findings concerning the first theme is the age span in the sample of this study. The sample represent individuals born between 1989 and 1995, representing a younger generation that recently entered the labor market. The findings, specifically related to feeling invisible and fear of losing one's job, could be prominent due to the individuals in the sample having few years of work experience, being newly recruited, and not being as established in their organization. If the sample consisted of a generation with another age span, the findings might have differed. For example, if the sample consisted of older generations that likely had established their role in the organization for years, the fear of losing one's job might not be as prominent. In Swedish organizations, employment is regulated by the Employment Protection Act, which allows some advantages for employees employed for a long time, opposite the newly recruited (Sveriges Riksdag, 2021).

Suggestively, older generations could experience other fears concerning their engagement in remote work due to COVID-19, possibly related to not being as technologically experienced as younger generations. However, to reach such conclusions or to understand what impact the age in the sample has on the findings, a similar study with a sample consisting of older generations should be conducted.

Moving forward to RQ2 on how employees communicate engagement through external expressions when working remotely due to COVID-19, our findings suggest that external expressions were: (1) translated into digital versions of what would count as engagement in a physical office, (2) used as a way to maintain relationships, (3) based on collective creation of engagement and exchanged through an engagement pot.

Employees used the physical office as a reference point for what would be considered as engagement displays remotely. For example, the respondents argued that participating in an after-work event would count as engagement in a physical setting and continued to participate in digital after-works' during remote work for the same reason. External expressions of engagement were communicated through *joining social digital activities*, *taking social initiatives,* and *expressing a positive mindset*, which overlaps with Schroeder & Modaff's (2018) examples of how engagement is communicated through external expressions in a physical office, e.g "attending organizational events" and "create personal connections" (p.38). Acknowledging Schroeder & Modaff's (2018) findings on external expressions, our findings suggest that employees' external expressions of EE did not change in a remote setting but were instead translated into digital versions of what would count as engagement in a physical environment.

Possibly, the findings mentioned above could have been impacted by the sample being made up of individuals from Sweden working in Swedish organizations. The examples are given by the respondents of how they communicated external expressions of engagement were often activities typical in a Swedish work context, such as having fika with colleagues. When comparing these examples to Schroder and Modaffs (2018) study, which took place in an American context, examples of external expressions differed. For example, the respondents in Shroder and Modaffs' (2018) study suggested that doing voluntary work on behalf of the organization was a way for them to communicate engagement, which none of our respondents mentioned. An explanation for this difference can be that voluntary work for organizations is not as common in Swedish work culture. These differences in examples between the two

studies suggest that culture could be a factor that impacts displays of EE and that a Swedish context might impact the findings in this study. However, comparative studies between different cultural contexts and displays of employee engagement should be conducted to make such suggestions.

Our findings also suggest that external expressions of EE in the remote work setting were primarily displayed to maintain personal relationships with colleagues. Our participants argued that external expressions of EE among colleagues had great importance for making sure that the already established personal relationships stayed intact until things were back to 'normal'. The focus on relationship maintenance with colleagues strengthens Schroeder & Modaff's (2018) argument that engagement is communicated among coworkers outside the formal job role, and not merely to the organization within the formal job role. The fact that remote work in this study was enforced due to COVID-19 might have contributed to the focus on maintaining relationships in this second theme. Since remote work in this context was implemented to slow down infection rates (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020), it was perceived as a temporary compromise rather than a long-term work style among the respondents. With the goal being to return to the physical office as soon as possible for all the respondents' organizations, the need to establish new ways of expressing EE through external expressions was not prioritized by the respondents in our study. Therefore, the focus on maintenance might not be as prominent in a planned and permanent remote work context.

In line with Belle et al. (2015) who argues that loss of workplace interaction harms the ability to engage, the respondents in our study experienced that the loss of interaction with colleagues challenged them to engage outside their formal job role. The respondents believed that remote work made it more difficult to not only show engagement but also to receive engagement from others which generated a feeling of being alone in staying engaged at work. The second theme illustrated the need for collective engagement creation for EE to exist as respondents frequently mentioned that engagement was something created between colleagues, and that generates a collective drive and joy.

Schroeder & Modaff's (2018) four-way, intersectional approach to EE offers an understanding of the collective engagement efforts as a prerequisite for individual engagement. Viewing engagement as a social exchange occurring in an intersection between employees, colleagues, supervisors, and the organization, the rules of exchange relies on that each party in the intersection understands how their actions are consequential for the other

parties. The intersection metaphor of a functioning four-way crossroad relies on that the drivers can see each other, communicate, and be aware of the risk one takes if deciding not to drive by the rules (Schroeder & Modaff, 2018). Using this metaphor to understand the effect remote work has had on the engagement intersection, each driver would then instead steer their cars from home without seeing each other or physically experiencing the risk of a crash, nor the joy of successful collaboration. Displaying engagement towards others in the organization during remote work can thus be understood as more challenging, as the lack of physical encounters left respondents with a feeling of being on their own and alone in their engagement expressions.

Finally, the understanding of EE as depending on collective engagement creation indicates that not every exchange of engagement builds on reciprocity between two interdependent parties as previous literature has suggested (Saks, 2006; Saks & Gruman 2014). Our findings suggest that the collective creation of engagement is built on exchanges between colleagues, but the respondents did not seem to understand all exchanges as occurring between two specific parties. Rather, the respondents discussed engagement as something that was held together among organizational members, indicating that certain engagement exchanges were instead made into a collective engagement pot. The finding of an engagement pot carries theoretical implications which can nuance and expand the theoretical understanding of EE as a social exchange only guided by rules of reciprocity, suggesting that engagement can be exchanged simultaneously between more than two parties.

Based on the findings that external expressions of engagement are collectively created and exchanged between colleagues through an engagement pot, an additional rule to guide the exchange process of EE could be the rule conceptualized as *group gain* in SET (Cropanzo and Mitchell, 2005). Group gain is a less researched rule of exchange that, in contrast to reciprocity, guides exchanges that are not interpersonal and of one-to-one nature. In Cropanzano & Mitchell (2005) group gain is described as a rule of exchange where a group of people contributes with a certain benefit to a common pot, for instance, engagement. In social exchanges guided by group gain, individuals can take from the pot whenever they want, regardless of their particular contribution. Unlike in exchanges guided by rules of reciprocity, the benefit is held in common when guided by the rule of group gain (Cropanzo and Mitchell, 2005; Zhu, 2012). Our suggestion of group gain as a possible rule for certain social exchanges of EE allows for a more complex idea of the phenomena by hinting that exchanges of EE can

take different shapes in an organization depending on why, when, and with whom the exchange takes place.

The concept of group gain could add theoretical clarification to Schroeder and Modaff's (2018) intersection approach, as well as the argument of EE as being a multifaceted phenomenon beyond two-way exchanges. Further, the suggestion that certain social exchanges of EE build on the concept of group gain enables a strengthened connection between EE and SET by demonstrating additional theoretical connections. In considering group gain as a complementary exchange rule to reciprocity, rather than a substitute, our proposed theoretical notion does not challenge established research about EE and its reciprocal nature (Saks, 2006). However, our theoretical suggestion does respond to previous critics regarding the use of SET in relation to the new, complex workplace (Cropanzano et. al, 2017; Chernyak-Hai, & Rabenu, 2018), as "work relationships are becoming more complex than can be represented by simple dyadic reciprocity" (Cooper-Thomas & Morrison, 2018, p. 493). The finding of group gain as a possible rule of social exchanges of EE can further nuance how the phenomena are approached in academia by suggesting that exchanges may be guided by different rules depending on why, who and when the exchange of EE is taking place. By exploring group gain and EE further, such knowledge could nuance the understanding of EE in the research field, and possibly give SET further explanatory power in the modern workplace.

Practical implications for organizations and management

Considering that EE holds a dual promise of improved organizational performance and individual well-being (Truss et al., 2013) and that communication has the potential to enhance levels of EE within an organization (Welch, 2011), this study can provide valuable practical implications. Especially as remote work is expected to continue in the future/after the pandemic, our findings do point to important (possible) issues and opportunities for organizations. Insight on how employee engagement is communicated could bring guidance to managers in the challenge of creating engagement in a remote work setting (Sodexo, 2020). It could support management's decision-making by helping to detect engagement displays on distance, thereby supporting actions that enable employees to engage.

Firstly, explicit communication from managers on what is expected of their employees can make the rules of reciprocity more concrete, enabling employees to know when they have

repaid their organization. For instance by (1) acknowledging engagement displays made by employees during remote work, (2) give feedback on those engagement displays in order to (3) confirm that the means for repayment are valid. In other words, managers should let employees know that their engagement displays are being noticed and are appreciated. Such action communicates what the accepted rules of reciprocity are in a remote work setting, and can reduce anxiety and worry among employees in terms of the possible transgression of mutual agreements. Moreover, managers who acknowledge and give feedback on engagement displays reduce the risk of decreased levels of EE over time, as feedback and recognition are factors known to positively affect EE within organizations (Welch, 2011; Saks & Gruman, 2014). Based on the findings of this study managers can acknowledge the behaviors of *showcasing productivity*, *proving presence using technology*, and *taking an active role in digital meetings* as engagement displays, and give suitable feedback to the employees in return.

Secondly, the findings of this study suggest that social activities have the potential for collective engagement to exist within organizations and should not be underestimated in a remote work setting. One of the most challenging parts of remote work for EE, was the lack of social interaction and support from colleagues. Although social activities involved challenges when being translated to a remote setting, respondents still argued to be an important part for the common engagement 'pot' to keep on operating. Managers can take inspiration from the second theme and sub-themes presented (Table 5) and take greater responsibility in arranging meetings or events meant for socialization with other organizational members.

Finally, in regards to our findings of a collective engagement pot and group gain as a possible rule of social exchange of EE, managers are encouraged to pay attention to how employees' displays of EE affect each other. For instance, unequal contributions to the collective engagement pot over time. Considering that EE was shown to partly be determined by whether others displayed engagement or not, a few employees could potentially decrease the overall engagement within an organization if they are showing signs of disengagement, and vice versa.

Suggestions for future research

Research contributions on how engagement is communicated in a remote work setting not affected by COVID-19 are still unaccounted for in the field of EE. Contributions of such knowledge would give insight in how employees display engagement in a remote work setting that is not enforced, unplanned or incused of economic uncertainty, as in the case of remote work due to COVID-19 (Waizenegger, 2020). The findings of such research could be valuable for the research field in general as future organizational life is expected to include remote work to a higher degree (Sodexo, 2020). Thus creating motivations for understanding organizational behaviour such as EE in a remote work context. In relation to this specific study, such knowledge could also enable possibilities for comparison and bring clarity into what degree the pandemic context affected our findings. For example, whether it was remote work in general or the specific context of COVID-19 that brought the perceived gain of importance to the role defined displays.

Further, future research could explore the possible expanded connection between EE and SET by investigating what explanatory power the concept of group gain as a rule of exchange holds for exchanges of EE among certain organizational members. This possible theoretical connection would need to be additionally examined, but as argued by Cropanzo and Mitchell (2005), the concept of group gain holds potential for management research. Such research initiatives could bring valuable insight to SET's relevance in the modern workplace, where critics have argued that the framework has limitations in explaining more complex organizational relationships (Chernyak-Hai, & Rabenau, 2018; Cooper-Thomas & Morrison, 2018). By contributing to the research field on the concept of group gain and EE, the value of SET as a theoretical framework beyond rules of reciprocity could be further demonstrated.

Limitations of study

This study is limited in generalizability because of its qualitative nature and the relatively small sample, but since the aim has rather been to contribute with in-depth knowledge about the studied topic, it has not been considered to be an issue. A general limitation in interview studies is that the data is based on the respondents' degree of self-reflexiveness and is subjective in nature. With a thorough interview guide to help respondents reflect on the discussed subject, such limitations have been taken into consideration.

The convenience snowball sampling strategy to recruit participants could arguably be a weakness for the representativeness of the sample. However, the aim of the study is not to create generalizable claims for a big population. By creating narrow inclusion criteria for participation, the link between sample and target population has been enhanced, which generates a representative sample for the studied topic. For example, this study was conducted with Swedish participants working in Swedish-based organizations, decisions that were made to generate a representative sample for the studied topic in a Swedish context. Therefore, the findings of this study are limited to the specific socio-cultural context of Sweden and might not be generalizable to other cultural contexts. As the age span of the respondents was relatively narrow, there is a possible limitation of the findings in the generalizability for different age groups. Further, the context of COVID-19 makes the findings of this study unique since no previous research has been done on enforced and unplanned remote work and displays of EE. This uniqueness brings pros and cons since it adds new, important knowledge in regards to the studied topic, but also reduces in what contexts the findings are relevant. That is, our findings might not apply in a remote work context that is not affected by COVID-19. The fact that the respondents in this study were enforced, and unplanned remote workers may have contributed to the experienced difficulties in making the remote way of work function as wished. These difficulties were partly shown in the comparison of remote work with a physical office as the "normal" way of working, thus viewing remote work as something temporary that only applies during COVID-19.

This study includes individuals from different organizations and did not have to accommodate a particular organization's definition of EE, making up for one of the argued limitations in Shroder and Modaff (2018). An arguable weakness in this study, related to the issue of self-reflexiveness, is instead the possibility that all respondents hold personal understandings of what engagement means for them, which could imply uncertainty as to whether the employees discussed the same phenomena in the data. However, as this study aims to contribute with an employee perspective, the employees' understanding of EE is of relevance and can be justified in the purpose and qualitative character of this study.

Conclusion

Drawing on Schroeder & Modaff ‘s (2018) findings of how employees communicate engagement and the applied use of SET and EE, this study expands the knowledge of EE as a communicative phenomenon by exploring it in a new context. As addressed in our study on how EE is communicated during remote work due to COVID-19, employees' engagement displays in a remote work setting stem from a comparison of how engagement used to be displayed in a physical office environment. This comparison generated different outcomes in relation to role defined displays (RQ1) and external expressions (RQ2). In regards to RQ1, the findings in our study suggest that remote workers communicate EE through *showcasing productivity*, *proving presence using technology*, and *taking an active role in digital meetings*. Our findings contribute to a deepened understanding about role defined displays in a remote work setting, as the findings suggest that the communicative behaviors were performed with the intent to compensate for the lack of physical presence. The respondents also perceived engagement related to the formal job role as having gained importance. The perceived gain in importance is suggested to depend on uncertainties related to rules of reciprocity and contextual factors brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as economic instability.

In regards to RQ2, the findings in our study suggest that remote workers communicate EE through *joining social digital activities*, *taking social initiatives*, and *expressing a positive mindset*. The findings that refer to the second theme contributes to a deepened understanding of external expressions in a remote work setting, suggesting that engagement displays outside the formal job role were translated into digital versions of what would count as engagement in a physical office. External expressions were also displayed with the intent to maintain personal relationships with organizational members.

Further, the findings suggest that the respondents understood individual engagement as being based on collective creation of engagement and exchanged through an engagement pot. The theoretical implications from these findings contribute to a notion that the phenomena of EE in complex, modern organizations might be better understood by additional rules of social exchanges, beyond reciprocity. This study specifically suggests the rule of group gain as a possible rule of social exchanges of EE among certain organizational members. A theoretical suggestion that goes in line with Schroeder and Modaff’s (2018) intersection approach to EE that reviews the two-way nature of the phenomena. By connecting EE with additional components of SET, our study enables a more nuanced way of

understanding coexistence between organizational members and contributes to the effort of making SET a utile theoretical framework in the modern and complex workplace.

References

Ahmed, T., Shahid Khan, M., Thitivesa, D., Siraphatthada, Y., & Phumdara, T. (2020). Impact of employees engagement and knowledge sharing on organizational performance: Study of HR challenges in COVID-19 pandemic. *Human Systems Management*, (Preprint), 1-15.

Anderson, D., & Kelliher, C. (2009). Flexible working and engagement: the importance of choice, *Strategic HR Review*, *8*(2), 13-18. doi: 10.1108/14754390910937530

Bailey, K., & Breslin, D. (2021). The COVID-19 Pandemic: What can we learn from past research in organizations and management? *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *23*(1), 3-6. doi: 10.1111/ijmr.12237

Belle, S. M., Burley, D., & Long, S. (2015). Where do I belong? High-intensity teleworkers'experience of organizational belonging. *Human Resource Development International, 18*(1), 76-96. doi: 10.1080/13678868.2014.979006

Biernacki, P., & Waldorf, D. (1981). Snowball sampling: Problems and techniques of chain referral sampling. *Sociological Methods & Research, 10*(2), 141-163. doi: 10.1177/004912418101000205

Blau, P. (2017). *Exchange and power in social life*. Routledge.

Bryman, A (2016). *Social research methods*. Oxford University Press.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Cambridge Dictionary. (2021, April 28). *Remote working definition.* Retrieved April 27, 2021, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/remote-working.

Chernyak-Hai, L., & Rabenu, E. (2018). The new era workplace relationships: Is social exchange theory still relevant? Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice, 11(3), 456–481. doi: 10.1017/iop.2018.5

Cooper-Thomas, H., & Morrison, R. (2018). Give and Take: Needed Updates to Social Exchange Theory. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 11*(3), 493-498. doi: 10.1017/iop.2018.101

Cropanzano, R., & Mitchell, M. S. (2005). Social exchange theory: An interdisciplinary review. *Journal of Management, 31*(6), 874-900. doi: 10.1177/0149206305279602

Cropanzano, R., Anthony, E., Daniels, S., & Hall, A. (2017). Social exchange theory: A critical review with theoretical remedies. *Academy of Management Annals*, *11*(1), 1-38. doi: 10.5465/annals.2015.0099

Delgado, D., Hill, N., Regalado, A., & Waldman, N. (2020). Millennials leading the workforce. *Journal of Business Studies Quarterly*, *10*(2), 35-42.

Emerson, R. (1976). Social Exchange Theory. *Annual Review of Sociology, 2*(1), 335-362.

Farrar, J. (2020, September 23). *The many ways Covid-19 is affecting societies and economies*. News. Wellcome.Org. Retrieved February 12, 2021, from https://wellcome.org/news/equality-global-poverty-how-covid-19-affecting-societies-and-economies

Folkhälsomyndigheten (2020) *Arbeta hemma.* Retrieved February 12, 2021, from https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/smittskydd-beredskap/utbrott/aktuella-utbrott/covid-19/skydda-dig-och-andra/arbete-hemma/

Gajendran, R. S., & Harrison, D. A. (2007). The good, the bad, and the unknown about telecommuting: Meta-analysis of psychological mediators and individual consequences. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 92*(6), 1524–1541. doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.92.6.1524

Gallup, Inc. (2021, April 7). *How to Improve Employee Engagement in the Workplace - Gallup*. Gallup.Com. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from https://www.gallup.com/workplace/285674/improve-employee-engagement-workplace.aspx

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods, 18*(1), 59-82. doi: 10.1177/1525822X05279903

Harter, B. J. (2020-07-02). *Historic drop in employee engagement follows record rise.* Gallup Retrieved March 7, 2021, from https://www.gallup.com/workplace/313313/historic-drop-employee-engagement-follows-record-rise.aspx?fbclid=IwAR1eEDO_VNFSQLHJ8E6bvVGzr_p4VwZ6pOJW22kedrfysmwPCFEwZgmE70I

Hynes, G. (2012). Improving employees' interpersonal communication competencies: A qualitative study. *Business Communication Quarterly, 75*, 466–475. doi: 10.1177/1080569912458965

Jablin, F. M., & Putnam, L. L. (2001). *The new handbook of organizational communication*. SAGE Publications, Inc. doi: 10.4135/9781412986243

Jones, L., Paumbo, D., Brown, D. (2021-01-25) *How the pandemic has changed the world economy.* BBC. Retrieved February 20, 2021, from https://www.bbc.com/news/business-51706225

Kvale, S. (2007). *Doing interviews* (Qualitative research kit). London: SAGE Publications.

Lee, A., Sherman, Kenneth C., Gould, Dave, & Heitner, Keri. (2018). *An Exploratory Case Study of How Remote Employees Experience Workplace Engagement*, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

Lindlof, T. R & Tailor, B. C (2019). *Qualitative communication research methods*. Fourth ed. Sage Publications, California.

Mann, A. & Adkins, B. A. M. A. A. (2017, March 22). *How Engaged Is Your Remote Workforce?* Gallup.Com. Retrieved March 7, 2021, from https://www.gallup.com/workplace/236375/engaged-remote-workforce.aspx

McKibbin, W., & Fernando, R. (2020). The global macroeconomic impacts of COVID-19: Seven scenarios. *Asian Economic Papers*, 1-55. doi: 10.1162/asep_a_00796

Meeker, B. F. (1971). Decisions and exchange. *American Sociological Review*, 485-495. doi: 10.2307/2093088

Mishra, K., Boynton, L., & Mishra, A. (2014). Driving employee engagement: The expanded role of internal communication. *Journal of Business Communication, 51*, 183–202. doi: 10.1177/2329488414525399

Morris, P. L. (2017). Triangulation. *The SAGE encyclopedia of communication research methods*, 1781-1783. doi: 10.4135/9781483381411.n633

O'Connor, C., & Joffe, H. (2020). Intercoder reliability in qualitative research: Debates and practical guidelines. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *19*. doi: 10.1177/1609406919899220

Orhan, M. A., Rijsman, J. B., & van Dijk, G. M. (2016). Invisible, therefore isolated: Comparative effects of team virtuality with task virtuality on workplace isolation and work outcomes. *Revista de Psicología Del Trabajo y de Las Organizaciones, 32*(2), 109–122. doi: 10.1016/j.rpto.2016.02.002

International Labour Organization. (2020, September 10). *ILO welcomes G20 commitment to inclusive, employment-focused recovery from COVID-19 crisis.* Ilo.Org. Retrieved March 3, 2021, from https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_754971/lang--en/index.htm

Robertson-Smith, G., & Markwick, C. (2009). *Employee engagement: A review of current thinking.* Brighton: Institute for Employment Studies.

Robinson, O. C. (2014). Sampling in interview-based qualitative research: A theoretical and practical guide. *Qualitative research in psychology, 11*(1), 25-41. doi: 10.1080/14780887.2013.801543

Saks, A. M. (2006). Antecedents and consequences of employee engagement. *Journal of managerial psychology*. doi: 10.1108/02683940610690169

Saks, A. M., & Gruman, J. A. (2014). What do we really know about employee engagement? *Human resource development quarterly*, *25*(2), 155-182. doi: 10.1002/hrdq.21187

Saladino, V., Algeri, D., & Auriemma, V. (2020). The psychological and social impact of Covid-19: new perspectives of well-being. *Frontiers in psychology, 11*, 2550. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.577684

Statistiska Centralbyrån (2020-11-26). *En av tre jobbar hemifrån*. Retrieved March 3, 2021, from https://www.scb.se/om-scb/nyheter-och-pressmeddelanden/en-tre-av-jobbar-hemifran/

Schaufeli, W. B. (2014). What is engagement? In C. Trussq, R. Delbridge, K. Alfes, A. Shantz, & E. Soane (Eds.), *Employee engagement in theory and practice*. 15-35. New York, NY: Routledge.

Schroeder, S., & Modaff, D. P. (2018). Exploring employee engagement through communication. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, *19*(1), 35-43. doi: 10.1080/17459435.2018.1468807

Social Research Association (2003, December). *Ethical guidelines.* Retrieved February 19, 2021, from https://the-sra.org.uk/common/Uploaded%20files/ethical%20guidelines%202003.pdf

Sodexo (2020-12-22) *Svenska företagare ger grönt ljus för hemarbete efter pandemin - 16 procent kan fortsätta jobba hemifrån.* Sodexo. Retrieved March 3, 2021, from https://www.mynewsdesk.com/se/sodexo/pressreleases/svenska-foeretag-ger-groent-ljus-foer-hemarbete-efter-pandemin-3061491

ST. (2020). *Jobba hemifrån - är distansarbete här för att stanna?* Fackförbundet ST. Retrieved March 3, 2021, from https://st.org/sites/default/files/attachment/st_rapport_-_distansarbete_0.pdf

Sveriges Riksdag (2021). Lag (1982:80) om anställningsskydd. Retrieved: June 7, 2021, from https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/lag-198280-om-anstallningsskydd_sfs-1982-80

Tele2 (2020, May 12) *Distansarbete under Corona*. Retrieved March 3, 2021, from https://mb.cision.com/Public/7793/3109060/9c1b3728e95cae80.pdf

Truss, C., Alfes, K., Delbridge, R., Shantz, A., & Soane, E. (Eds.). (2013). *Employee engagement in theory and practice*. Routledge.

University of Cambridge. (2021). *Academic research involving personal data. Research integrity.* Retrieved March 15, 2021, from https://www.research-integrity.admin.cam.ac.uk/academic-research-involving-personal-data

Vetenskapsrådet (2017). God forskningssed. https://www.vr.se/download/18.2412c5311624176023d25b05/1555332112063/God-forskningssed_VR_2017.pdf

Waizenegger, L., McKenna, B., Cai, W., & Bendz, T. (2020). An affordance perspective of team collaboration and enforced working from home during COVID-19. *European Journal of Information Systems*, *29*(4), 429-442. doi: 10.1080/0960085X.2020.180041

Welch, M. (2011). The evolution of the employee engagement concept: communication implications. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*. doi: 10.1108/13563281111186968

Wintermeyer, L. (2020-09-17) *Covid and the new world order - building a new Human centered economy.* Forbes. Retrieved March 3, 2021, from https://www.forbes.com/sites/lawrencewintermeyer/2020/09/17/coivd-and-the-new-world-orderbuiding-a-new-human-centered-economy/

Zhu, Yanhan. (2012). A review of social exchange relationship. (Report). *Studies in Sociology of Science, 3*(3), 57-61.

Appendixes

Appendix 1. Recruiting message

Hej (namn)! Mitt namn är (forskarens namn) och jag kontaktar dig då (namn på referens) har angett dig som en möjlig deltagare i den studie som vi just nu genomför som sista del av vår masterutbildning på Göteborgs Universitet. Om det är så att du passar in i de kriterier satta för studien skulle vi vilja fråga dig om du vill delta, något som givetvis sker sker på helt frivillig basis. Studiens syfte går ut på att undersöka hur anställda kommunicerar sitt engagemang när man arbetar hemifrån på grund av COVID-19. Har du varit tvungen att arbeta hemifrån av den anledningen och inte gjort det tidigare, inte innehar en chefsposition och arbetar i en svensk organisation, passar du för vår studie. Om du väljer att delta kommer vi boka en tid för intervju med dig, där vi diskuterar studiens frågeställning gällande att kommunicera engagemang i en virtuell arbetsmiljö. Intervjun tar mellan 30-60 minuter och sker över Zoom, detta för att genomföra intervjun smittsäkert. I studien är din anonymitet garanterad och all data är konfidentiellt hanterad av enbart mig och min uppsatspartner. Vi uppskattar din återkoppling om detta låter intressant! Tack på förhand.

Translated version of original message

Hello (name)! My name is (name of researcher) and the reason I'm messaging you is because (name on reference) have referred to you as a possible participant in the study we're currently conducting at the University of Gothenburg as part of our master education. If you're a match for the criterias outlayed in the study we would appreciate your participation greatly, but it is of course completely voluntary. The purpose of the study is to investigate how employees communicate engagement when working remotely from home during COVID-19. If you've been forced to work from home due to COVID-19 and didn't do it before, don't have a supervisor position and work in a Swedish organisation, you fit the criteria of the study. If you choose to participate, we will book a time for an interview with you, discussing the research question of communicating engagement in a virtual workplace. The interview will approximately take 30-60 minutes and will be conducted over Zoom, to ensure no risk for infection. In the study, your anonymity is guaranteed and all data will be confidentially handled only by me and my research partner. We appreciate your answer if this sounds interesting to you. Thanks.

Appendix 2. Consent form.

TIA069 - Master degree project in communication

University of Gothenburg, Institution for Applied IT.

Consent to take part in research

I…… voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

I understand that participation involves approximately a one hour interview, where I will be discussing my own thoughts and understandings of communicating engagement when working remotely during COVID-19.

I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.

I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the finished version of the thesis in TIA069 - Master degree project in communication. I am aware that it might be published in a public context.

I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.

I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for a three months period after the interview has taken place.

I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.

I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of research participant

---------- ----------

Signature of participant Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

---------- ----------

Appendix 3. Debriefing form.

Title of the project: Communicating Employee Engagement when working remotely during COVID-19 - an employee perspective
Researcher: Sara Bjurenvall and Olivia Pernefors
Department: Applied Information Technology
Contact Information: Telephone Sara (+46)76 1607667, Olivia (+46)70 2638584, Email gusbjusa@student.gu.se, gusperneol@student.gu.se

Thank you for participating in our interview study!
You have taken part in a research study to learn more about how engagement is communicated by employees when working remotely due to COVID-19. The findings from this interview may help improve the effectiveness of leadership in virtual environments, and a deepened knowledge about remote work and employee engagement in general.

Questions/concerns: If you have any questions about this study, please email either Sara Bjurenvall at gusbjusa@student.gu.se or Olivia Pernefors at gusperneol@student.gu.se. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Head of Department at the Institution for Applied IT, University of Gothenburg at (+46)733-13 02 46 or Jonas.Landgren@ait.gu.se.

Appendix 4. Interview guide

Uppvärmningsfrågor

Hur har det varit för dig att jobba hemifrån det senaste året/månaderna?

Vad har varit det bästa och det värsta med att arbeta hemifrån?

Del ett: generell förståelse av engagemang i en arbetskontext

Definition of engagement: En definition av engagemang är viljan att göra bra ifrån sig på jobbet och att vara en del av framgången (IHM Business School). En annan definition är Att vara delaktig i något och visa stort intresse för dess framgång (Wiktionary)

1.1 Vad tycker du är att engagera sig på jobbet?

1.2 Känner du dig, generellt sett, engagerad i din organisation?

1.3 Hur visade du engagemang på jobbet innan covid-19?

Del två: Hur engagemang kommuniceras när jobbet sker hemifrån på grund av corona, och vad som kan vara motivationen bakom ett sådant beteende.

2.1 Hur visar du för andra att du är engagerad nu när arbetsplatsen är digital på grund av covid? Tex. möten, mail/chatt/telefon, arbetsuppgifter, tillgänglighet etc.

2.1.1 Kan du berätta om en situation då du kände dig engagerad, och hur du i så fall visade det?

2.1.2 Varför tror du att du visar engagemang på detta/dessa sätt?

2.2 Hur visar du engagemang i relation till dina arbetsuppgifter nu när du jobbar hemifrån?

2.3 Hur visar du engagemang gentemot organisationen som helhet när jobbet sker hemifrån?

2.4 Nu när ni inte är på plats på kontoret, vem på arbetsplatsen försöker du främst visa ditt engagemang för?

2.4.1 Varför tror du att det är så?

2.5 Kan du ge exempel på hur andra har visat att de är engagerade på ditt jobb under corona?

2.5.1 Kan du ge exempel på en situation när andra visat att de är oengagerade?

2.6 Har du deltagit i sociala sammankomster som är utöver arbetsuppgifter? Aw, fikor etc.

2.6.1 Varför/varför inte?

2.6.2 Vad är din inställning till sådana digitala event?

2.7 Har du haft mer, mindre eller lika mycket kontakt med din chef under corona?

2.7.1 Hör du av dig till din chef via mail, chatt, sms, videochatt, telefon etc?

2.7.2 Påverkas ditt engagemang av hur ofta och hur mycket du hörs med din chef på något sätt?

2.8 Upplever du att kontakten med andra har påverkat ditt engagemang i organisationen?

2.8 Vad är den främsta anledningen till att visa engagemang på jobbet nu under corona?

2.8.1 Har de anledningarna ändrats på något sätt om du jämför med innan COVID?

2.9 Vad upplever du har påverkat din grad av engagemang under hemmajobb i corona?

2.10 Kan du berätta om en situation då du känt dig oengagerad, och hur du i så fall visat det?

Avslutande frågor:

Är det något annat som du skulle vilja nämna gällande det vi har diskuterat idag, som du tycker jag borde veta?

Har du några avslutande frågor till mig?

Opening questions

How has it been for you to work from home this past year?

What have been the best and worst parts of working from home?

Part one: general understanding of engagement in an work context

Definition of engagement: A willingness to do/perform good at work and also to be a part of organizational success. (En definition av engagemang är viljan att göra bra ifrån sig på jobbet och att vara en del av framgången) To be involved in something and to show great interest for its success. (Att vara delaktig i något och visa stort intresse för dess framgång

1.1 What does it mean to be engaged at work in your opinion?

1.2 Generally speaking, do you feel engaged in your organization?

1.3 How did you display engagement at work before COVID-19?

Part two: How engagement is communicated when working remotely during COVID-19, and what might be the motivators behind such behaviours.

2.1 How do you display your engagement to others when working remotely during COVID-19? E.g in digital meetings, mail/chats/phone calls, work tasks, accessibility etc.

2.1.1 Can you think of a situation where you felt engaged, and how you communicated that?

2.1.2 Why do you think that you display it in these ways?

2.2 How do you display engagement in relation to the job tasks that you have when working remotely due to COVID-19??

2.3 How do you display engagement to the overall organization when working remotely due to COVID-19?

2.4 When not being physically present at the office, to whom in your organization do you try to communicate your engagement?

2.4.1 Why is that?

2.5 Would you like to exemplify how others have displayed engagement when working remotely during COVID-19?

2.5.1 Can you give an example of how others haven't communicated engagement? E.g in a meeting.

2.6 Have you been taking part in social activities beside your work tasks? Such as AW's, fikas etc.

2.6.1 Why, why not?

2.6.2 How do you feel about such events in a remote setting?

2.7 Have you been in more or less contact with supervisors during COVID-19?

2.7.1 Do you reach out to your supervisors via email, chat, text message, video chat or in any other way?

2.7.2 Does the amount of contact affect your organisational engagement in any way?

2.8 What is the main reason for communicating engagement during current circumstances?

2.8.1 Are those reasons any different from before COVID-19?

2.9 What do you perceive have affected your engagement while working from home during COVID-19?

2.10 Can you think of a situation when you feel disengaged, how do you communicate that?

Finishing questions:

Is there anything else regarding what we have been discussing today that you feel I should know?

Do you have any final questions for me?

Appendix 5. Quotes

Respondent	Original quote	Translated quote
R12	"Det är svårare att visa engagemang nu, på ett sätt. Jag har förlorat den del jag just beskrev, att kunna gå runt och liksom vara i organisationen. Jag har känt liksom, hur kan jag visa engagemang istället?"	"It's harder to show engagement now, in a way. I have lost the part I just described, walking around and being in the organization. I've felt like, how can I show engagement instead?"
R15	" På kontoret kan man bara gå förbi någon och ha känslan av att, bara för att jag sa hej till den personen, så har jag liksom fyllt den tanken eller typ laddat det batteriet. Men hemma känns det som att man försvinner, och då rinner det ut, och då kanske man vill visa engagemang på andra sätt."	"In the office you can just walk by and have the feeling that, just because I said hi to that person, I've filled the tank or charged that battery, but at home it feels like you disappears, and those things fizzle out, and then you might want to show engagement in other ways"
R15	"Jag vet inte.. men ja, jag tror osynligheten skapar nog en större rädsla, och även situationen, alltså pandemin skapar en ännu större rädsla att bli av med jobbet"	"I don't know.. but yes, I think the invisibility generates a fear, and well the situation, the pandemic, creates an even bigger fear of losing one's job."
R6	"Man vet om någon jobbar eller inte beroende på om symbolen i Teams är grön eller gul. Det är därför jag försöker att ha min symbol grön hela tiden."	"You know if someone is working or not depending on whether the symbol in Teams is green or yellow. That's why I try to stay green all the time."